

ETHICS & VETERINARY ORTHODONTICS

Veterinary Orthodontics can be a lot of fun. Moving teeth around is more gratifying than pulling them out and taking an abnormal bite and making it normal is very satisfying. However, I do not do a lot of orthodontic movement for a few very simple reasons. One of the big ones is that it would be unethical in many cases.

Many of the requests for orthodontic movement come from owners of show dogs looking to improve the dog's chances in the show ring. In essence, the owners are asking us to mask a genetic fault so their dog can win points in the ring and then be bred to pass on the defective genes. This is not how you improve a breed.

Dogs and cats are not entitled to a perfect bite, but they all deserve a comfortable one.

Many breeders will claim that the animal's orthodontic problem is not genetic. In most cases they are wrong or at least cannot prove that they are right. The shape and size of the facial bones as well as the number and position of teeth are genetically controlled.

Breeders will often claim that the bite was perfect until the dog started to play tug-of-war, shifting the incisors around. The human research has shown that to cause teeth to move within the bones, the orthodontic force has to be applied for at least eight hours a day. Puppies, no matter how active, are not going to shift their teeth about playing any games.

So if a dog presents with an abnormal bite, it is almost always due to a genetic fault. Even in cases where there is only a suspicion of genetic influence, it would be better to assume that the condition is heritable.

Correcting genetic faults for the purposes of showing is fraudulent. It could result in disciplinary or legal action against the owner and against the veterinarian who performed the procedure. If the owner of a dog that places second at a big show finds out that the first prizewinner had been altered cosmetically, I feel they would have grounds for a formal complaint and/or a lawsuit.

I know the show world is dirty. Breeders are always trying to justify their requests by pointing out some of the cheating that is so commonplace it is almost assumed. That notwithstanding, **I have a very firm policy that I will not perform cosmetic orthodontics on intact animals. I refuse to be an accessory to fraud.**

If any animal has an orthodontic problem that is causing traumatic tooth-to-tooth or tooth-to-soft tissue contact, it must be treated. If the animal is intact, I will offer selective extraction or selective crown height reduction to relieve the trauma and make the mouth comfortable. I also recommend that the animal not be bred, but I do not demand neutering as a condition of treatment.

If the animal has been neutered and a variety of other conditions are met, I will offer orthodontic movement as an option. Orthodontic movement takes time and requires considerable effort and commitment from the owner as well as a very co-operative patient.